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**‘They just dig St Antony, he’s right up their street, religious wise’:
Transnational Flows and Inter-religious Encounters in an East London
parish**

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Every Tuesday evening at 8pm throughout the year, a Catholic church in Forest Gate, East London is the scene of remarkable religious fervour across an immensely diverse constituency. Most weeks at least two hundred people of various ages and ethnicities buy and light hundreds of candles, a knot of people gather around a plaster statue of the Franciscan Antony of Padua (rubbing their hands along the folds of his brown habit) or they place slips of paper in a large wooden box marked ‘petitions’. Meanwhile a number of men and women walk on their knees from the back of the church to the altar, praying with moving lips with a lit candle between their hands, while others embrace and greet each other with kisses as they enter the church. This lively congregation has come for the ‘Novena of Saint Antony’, but the two hour-long devotion of intercessory prayers, hymns, scripture readings, relics veneration and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is unlike most encountered in other Catholic churches – for it brings together people from highly distinctive faith backgrounds, including a substantial number of self-identified (and publically acknowledged) Hindus as well as Irish Travellers from across London and beyond.

One of those regularly present is 38-year-old Jeyachandra, who was born in Sri Lanka and fled to India as a Tamil Tiger refugee, before coming to East Ham in 2008. Introduced to St Antony’s parish in 2010 by a Tamil friend, Jeyachandra occasionally visits the highly elaborate Sri Murugan Temple in

East Ham, but without fail attends Forest Gate every Tuesday as a supplicant of St Antony:

I am Hindu but you know it doesn't matter, the thing is I like to pray, I love to pray. I like to take bread and wine, the body of Jesus ... My parents were Hindu, we worship at Temple, but my father and mother also know Jesus, Mary, [and] they teach me like this.¹

In this approach to St Antony, drawing upon an imported familial tradition of inter-faith hospitality and warm encounter, each week Jeyachandra lights candles, sings hymns or shares a pew alongside Tamil Catholics, migrants from the Caribbean, extended Nigerian families and clusters of Filipino devotees. Distinctions of ethnicity, religion, class and caste are momentarily (and sometimes more permanently) circumvented in these embodied practices and shared intercessory needs in times of austerity in contemporary London.

After a brief introductory background to the saint, and the history of this shrine church (compiled through consultation of the Franciscan archives), this chapter draws upon extended ethnographic observation, written materials generated through fieldwork, and oral history interviews to examine the gendered, performed and embodied dimensions of this extra-liturgical and transnational devotion.² It advocates a methodological approach that takes seriously the 'lived religious experience', 'ordinary theology' and 'vernacular religion' of participants, moving beyond rigid and seemingly impermeable doctrinal and denominational categories (Ammerman 2006; McGuire 2008; Giordan 2011, 33; Bowman and Valk 2012; Astley et al 2013). Furthermore, it examines the performed, embodied and spatial dimensions of this multivalent and profoundly embodied Catholic devotion in which

institutional rituals and customs are transformed through the transnational flow of people, cultural practices and historic understandings (Tweed 2006). One strand of the case study examines the shared diasporic identities articulated by Tamil Catholics and Hindus present for the Novena and the colonial legacies and Christian missionary histories that contextualize this contemporary, boundary-crossing practice (David 2008, 89; Van Hear 2012, 61). Alongside this more contemporary migratory narrative, this chapter also explores the longstanding presence of Irish Catholic migrants in this part of London and their present-day manifestations in a gathered Irish Traveller community (Taylor 2008). Providing a space for the renewal of familial bonds and the pursuit of emotional (and spiritual) catharsis, the 'patron saint of lost things' helps these present-day devotees to (re)build community and articulate a diasporic conviviality. As both of these examples illustrate, contemporary migrant religious practice is transforming and enriching this historic extra-liturgical practice, thereby enabling a 'traditional' and transnational Catholic devotional to function as an innovative space for prayer, communion and encounter.

The Saint and his shrine church in East London

Fernando Martins, now known simply as St Antony, was born in Lisbon to a wealthy family in 1195 and after a brief period in an Augustinian Abbey joined the newly established Franciscans order, inspired by early martyrdoms and the Franciscan emphasis on poverty and evangelistic fervour. He initially intended to preach the gospel to Muslims in Morocco but ill health forced him to abandon this plan and after a period as a hermit in Romagna (Italy), he discovered his true vocation as an evangelizer – serving as St Francis'

second-in-command, training novices and preaching widely, including at the papal court. He was Provincial Superior of the order and established a monastery in Padua – hence the idealized Veneto background often present in church art portraying the saint. He was canonized a year after his death in 1232 by Pope Gregory IX and made a Doctor of the Church in 1945 (Ling 1995). He is venerated all over the world, known as the patron saint of ‘lost things’ and credited with many miracles (Wintz 2005). In Spain, Portugal and Brazil he is thought to be particularly efficacious in marriage creation and reconciliation (Finley 1994). He is usually represented, as on the front cover of the Forest Gate Novena booklet, in his Franciscan habit, with lilies to represent saintly purity and with a book, on which the Christ Child is seated, to symbolize his learning and biblical preaching.

Following their post-Reformation absence in Britain for over three hundred years, Franciscan monks established the parish of St Antony in 1884 in Forest Gate – then a semi-rural, lower middle class outer suburb of London – and commissioned a grand neo-gothic church from Peter Paul Pugin, son of Augustus, who continued his father’s renowned architectural legacy. The church was built to accommodate 1000 people and from its foundation served a lively parish community – in 1903 it had 4000 parishioners and was the largest parish in Greater London (Calder 1991)(Figure 1). From its consecration, St Antony’s has functioned as a shrine church, with the first altar to the saint installed through the donation of a Mrs Keane in 1892 and a replacement statue erected in 1931 (Calder 1991, 17), the 700th anniversary of the saint’s death (Figure 2). A further commemoration of this landmark celebration was a door-to-door petition of all residents of the neighbourhood in Forest Gate (followed by an application to West Ham Council) to change the

name of Khedive Road to St Antony's Road – a lasting public reminder to the neighbourhood of the presence of the saint's church (McLoughin and Cloonan 1984, 231). For well over a century, the church (in its spatiality but also ritual functionality) has offered a site of escape or pilgrimage from the dreariness of the everyday – an encounter with the numinous through beauty, enacting the insights of Roman and Anglo-Catholic incarnational theology of the late nineteenth-century (Gilley 1985, 255 and Harris 2013, 60) and reinforcing the Victorian fascination with the Franciscan ideals of poverty and simplicity (Ross 2014; Heimann 2001). Devotion to St Antony seems to have remained relatively strong throughout the many changes in the composition of the parish over the succeeding decades – from the predominantly Irish Catholic community at the turn of the century, through to the 1960s when a parish history recorded the introduction of a Polish mass and welcomed 'the very large communities of Caribbean and Asian families ... come to swell our numbers' (McLoughin and Cloonan 1984, 30). For example the newly inaugurated parish newsletter in May 1964, perhaps commenced in response to the Second Vatican Council's desire for the increased parochial involvement of the laity, recorded the following news item:

The Novena has shown a gratifying increase in the numbers of those attending and Tuesday evenings is beginning to mean a full Church. Fr Gordon is always anxious to hear of petitions from those desiring Novena prayers. His post-bag always carries Masses of thanksgiving for favours received. Perseverance in prayer is one of the greatest ways of increasing a deep and personal faith and trust in God – and only faith moves mountains!³

Further tangible evidence of faith in St Antony's intercessory powers was the sale of votive candles recorded in the parish's financial return of the previous year. Compared with £4936 received from annual collection takings (from a mass attendance of around 3200 people), a further £1138 was added to

church coffers through the sale of candles.⁴ This devotion, palpably expressed in material (and indeed monetary) terms continues to be strong in 2014, despite the departure of the Franciscans in 2001 and a profoundly differently configured congregation of around 4000 people from over 106 different countries.⁵ The newly appointed parish priest, a forty-four year old Irish-born religious of the post-conciliar, traditionalist Community of St John, confided that the sale of candles, for a suggested donation of £1, amounts to:

probably between £60,000 – £70,000 a year. Which is basically keeping the parish afloat. Because they're very poor people – 90% of people in Newham earn less than £25,000 a year.

Alongside this outlay ultimately funding the church's upkeep, devotees also make very generous donations to 'St Antony's bread' - which may only be used to fund emergency relief activities within the parish. With an astonishing surplus of around £30,000, this financial safety net allows the clergy to distribute discretionary cash sums in cases of immediate and dire need, such as immigration difficulties, imminent eviction, hunger or unforeseen funeral costs. For these recipients – as around £500-£1000 is distributed each week - St Antony continues to work minor miracles in this corner of East London. Illustrating the continuing salience of faith-based organizations as a supplement to the modern welfare state (Hilton and McKay 2011; cf Prochaska 2006), these contributions also substantiate an understanding of church as extended family, in which the more fortunate support the more needy through a form of spiritual (and actual) remittance (see Waddy 1997).

Diasporic devotions – customized in London

As the recently deceased and much mourned Father Dennis explained to me in 2009, speaking as one born in the East End who had served over fifty years of his priesthood in this part of London:

The Franciscans built this church ... [and] when the Franciscans went to India, there was a great devotion to the saints with the Hindus anyway, and St Anthony they all particularly liked, and the devotion spread into the Hindu community. [Therefore here in London] many Hindus come as well as Catholics, especially from India [and] especially on a Tuesday night for the novena. But they come during the week as well, so a lot of people pop in. So it's a very used church. But all the various Catholics from different countries, the different communities, use the church. The Nigerians, the Ghanaians, the South Americans, the Filipinos, the Goans, the Dominicans, St Lucians. And they have various masses through the year [because] various chaplains come. The Tamils are another big group. And Syro-Malabar, which is a south Indian section of the church, they come here quite regularly for retreats and masses. So the communities do use the church throughout the year. So this is why it's a very involved parish. There are a lot of people. There [are] things going on all the time, one way and the other. It's a well-used church. ⁶

Father Dennis' successor, a young, charismatic and Irish-born priest working within a French order and drawing upon his missionary work in Africa, India and Mexico, recounts a typical Tuesday within his church, and the hundred of people that stream through the door throughout the day:

Sometimes they're there at 6.15, but usually its 6.30am – there [are] usually people waiting [for me to open the church]. And they have these big bags and they're going up to the statue and they're holding out [objects]. And you can feel the intensity of the whole thing. Six thirty in the morning and they are coming in. ...Sometimes I just think I could just sit there and pray and watch the world go by. It's very touching. A lot of the Hindu people that come in during the day, they'll greet you but they won't come up and [talk]. They are very much in their own little liturgy.

Later at the evening, at the 8pm Novena, the crowd is much more diverse. Around a third of those in attendance are from the subcontinent, and there is a mostly balanced mix of men and women, running counter to sociological accounts of church growth and religious innovation which stress a feminization of religion (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012). Africa, Caribbean, Eastern European and longstanding, white East End devotees are also in evidence – though there is a tendency for these constituencies to sit slightly separately. The other strikingly distinct group present is a knot of young, white men with shaved heads, tattoos and an Irish lilt, lighting candles and praying conscientiously. Amongst them are half a dozen couples with young children, some of the women with carefully coiffed, bouffant hair and sparkling costume jewellery. I am told by Father John that the Traveller community is fervent in its devotion to St Antony: ‘their prayer system, religious belief system is very petition orientated ... St Antony’s the perfect, perfect guy for them ... they just dig St Antony, its right up their street, religious-wise’. These Irish Travellers come from all over London each week, from Harrow and Brent but also as far afield as Slough outside the boundaries of London, to offer their intentions and to seek forgiveness within the confessional. Father John continued:

Because they’re [in] such a dysfunctional world and there’s all these immediate problems coming in – domestic violence and all kinds of alcohol and abuse-related stuff, money worries or whatever – they cling to St Antony as hope. They have no system of counsellors, they have no – they have nothing. It’s all hush-hush. Everything is like taboo. So St Antony is the outlet for their deepest problems.

As the 2011 Census confirmed, exploring the characteristics of the 58,000 people (or 0.1% of the population of England and Wales) who identify as Gypsy or Irish Traveller, the religiosity of this ethnic group – which is also proportionally younger than the population of England and Wales – is

markedly more pronounced (64% compared to 59% of the national population) (Office for National Statistics 2014, 1, 7). While the importance of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the religious systems of Travellers has long been noted (Brownlee 2011), the ways in which devotions to other saints and 'pilgrimage' to more localised shrines and sites function for the community, has not been the subject of sustained analysis. Drawing upon the insights of Mary McClintock Fulkerson in reading the exposed 'wounds' of those engaged in these devotional practices – ranging from economic privation to emotional dysfunction – it is possible to discern a radically reconfigured notion of church beyond a monochrome ecclesial identity (Snyder, Ralston and Brazal 2016; Garnett and Harris 2013b). Through their embodied practices and prayerful petitions, we see demonstrated a creative and innovative 'marking out of a shared communal reality as well as the traditioning of that reality by authoritative Christian [scripts]' (McClintock Fulkerson 2007, 22-3).

The proceedings on Tuesday evenings commence with a series of seemingly archaic, universally formatted Novena prayers in front of the statue of St Antony – marked by repetitive refrains like 'St Antony, powerful in word and work', with the collective response 'Grant us what we ask of thee' (ETWN 2015). Another prayer in trite rhyming couplets conjures the intimate relationship between penitent and saint:

All dangers vanish at the prayer
so too incessant care and need
Let all who know thy power proclaim
Padua tell, its so decreed'.

These collective formula responses are punctuated by Catholics hymns, a reading from the New Testament and then perambulation from the north side altar to the front of the church, where a selection of the intercessions 'posted'

to St Antony are read from the pulpit. On the evenings that I have attended, more than fifty of these written petitions were read out and these prayers, anxieties and thanksgivings can be seen to fall into a discrete number of categories.

Petitions lodged for the Novena on 25 March 2014 – which were preserved with ethics clearance for permission to use in this research – numbered over three hundred, on diverse scraps of paper, which recorded in highly personal language requests for help, comfort and assistance. Health and relationship issues emerged as the prime concern for most of those present on that evening (as most others in fact). This finding is consistent with analysis of prayer intentions in an Anglican and rural setting, suggesting the continued use of prayer and faith for therapeutic and relational purposes, even in an age of modern medicine and coupled with scientific and often psychological approaches to health and familial well being (ap Siôn 2008, 53). Cancer, pending operations, mental health and sickness are ubiquitous, but preservation from black magic and evil spirits was also mentioned in a couple of petitions. Allied to these concerns were prayers for family life: for marital stability, for a safe birth or infant development and for the troubles (or illnesses) of children or grandchildren. Work, and relief from money problems featured strongly, as well as practical prayers to find (or keep) a house, to secure or sustain employment, and to deal with taxation issues (Vásquez 2010). Here we see the church as a site for the articulation, and potential attainment, of everyday succour – a crucible for intercession and intervention in a context in which the mostly migrant congregants present feel powerless, chiefly in their interactions with the state, and without deep and well-established temporal networks of patronage to negotiate assertions of

citizenship (Garnett and Hausner 2015). There is also embedded within this prayer formula a deep sense of gainful activity and agency – the loyalty, perseverance and reflectiveness of the penitent attending over nine consecutive Tuesdays is implicitly deemed deserving of a due hearing and just reward. Encapsulating something of this ambiguous relationship between faith and works, forty-something Traveller Ann Marie corrected herself: ‘St Antony is very good, he’s very good, very good. As long as you are good ... no, not as long as you are good, it don’t go that way. St Antony would help you, whoever you are, wherever you are.’⁷

A very striking and heart-rending strain of much of the correspondence generated on this March evening addressed the desire for love and companionship, either for oneself or a loved one. The search for a ‘good Catholic husband’, as well as the desire to start a family, are just some of the aspirations laid at the feet of the saint. The well-recognized role of the church as a context for ‘cosmopolitan sociability’ (Schiller et al 2011, 399), a community in which to find belonging, relational support and even love, is echoed in these petitions. More tangible and material – but perhaps just as intractable – problems brought to the saint included prayers for exams, for visas and resolution of immigration problems, for lost things (in a very twenty-first century vein chiefly mobile phones!), and for legal problems. The very ‘ordinariness’ of these requests provides an insight into everyday problems and the intimacy between saint and believer (ap Siôn 2010, 275). In the week intensively surveyed, there were also a few prayers of personal thanksgiving and some for world-related, generalized prayers, such as for the victims of the recently ‘lost’ Malaysian airplane or the London homeless.

Amongst these hundreds of slips of paper were thirty-four petitions written in a language other than English, mostly Tamil (but one in Sinhalese). Translation of these intercessions revealed an array of similar concerns, but also rhetorical differences, including more urgent petitions of St Antony drawing upon his biography ('you must have faced a similar problem')⁸ and traditional iconography ('your hands that held the baby Jesus should guide us').⁹ Some of the prayers also invoked the Trinity and the communion of saints (as almost a pantheon of deities), such as this multi-faceted intercession:

Father St. Anthony, Mother Mary, Jesus, My husband is having problems because of his illnesses. Please heal him. We don't have visas; the two of us are having so many hardships. You are the one[s] who can help us.¹⁰

A potential explanation for these discursive differences in intercessional tone and petitionary strategies was made explicit within one prayer (in English) which read:

My wife Mrs J is coming to this church since four months. From recent time[s] she suddenly got ill for no reason. We are Hindu but we believe in Jesus too. She has to get well soon. Please [St Antony] pray for my wife.¹¹

On Tuesdays when the Tamil priest stationed in the parish attends the Novena, the weekly petitions proffered in that language are read out. On more than one occasion, these requests are signed 'from a Hindu devotee' and the attitude of the longstanding former priest, and interestingly the newly arrived, conservative religious order, is that 'all are welcome' at this service or throughout the day when they create a parallel ritual, 'their own little liturgy' (Tweed 1997, 43-44). According to one longstanding petitioner, Ann Marie, who regularly visits the church on a Tuesday during the day to 'have a chat'

with St Antony, 'the Muslim community [also] goes into the church' and often three or four veiled Muslim women may be seen seated in the pews.¹²

Nevertheless there are limits to and some contestations surrounding this ecclesial hospitality. While veneration of the relic of St Antony at the Novena is open to all, public announcements have had to be made at the 10am Mass that the Eucharist is strictly reserved for Catholics. But there is also an acknowledgment that many Hindus come up for communion innocently and that it is sometimes difficult to detect the differences, physically or attitudinally, between Hindus and Tamil Catholics. In this ecclesial setting, as McClintock Fulkerson observes, the complexities of 'racialized, normalized and otherwise enculturated bodies and desire[s]' should be acknowledged, cutting across exclusionary definitions of religious affiliation (McClintock Fulkerson 2007, 21). In speaking to Father John about the deluge of pain, grief, insecurity and worries articulated – and off loaded – each week at the Novena, this sensitive pastor acknowledged 'it does give you a glimpse of the reality of people's [lives]. It's almost an X-ray of people's prayer. You really get the idea of what's ...' Here he paused – leading me to ponder the conclusion to his sentence. On my assessment, these prayers offer an intimate insight into the inner most longings, aspirations and anxieties of those who implore the intercession of St Antony (and often inchoately Christ) each week. It is a form of church and a transnational, customizable, culture-crossing devotion that offers hope and healing, reconciliation and recognition.

Devotion to St Antony is popular throughout all of India and Sri Lanka and inter-religious places of pilgrimage on the sub-continent are not uncommon, as scholars like Selva Raj have identified (Raj 2004, 33; Raj and Harman 2007). The sharing of sacred space between Catholics and Hindus

has its most famous example in the Marian shrine, Vailankanni, and visitation of this pilgrimage shrine, the 'Indian Lourdes', was mentioned by some of the Novena devotees. Alongside this, there is also an intensely popular, longstanding pilgrimage site to St Antony in Uvari, Tamil Nadu – the region of origin (alongside northern Sri Lanka) for a significant proportion of the Forest Gate congregation. According to legend, Portuguese sailors off the coast of Madras who were saved from cholera in the sixteenth century established a shrine to St Antony in thanksgiving and installed his carved wooden statue. The shrine church, the site of large festivities in February and on the saint's feast day in June (Figure 3), was created in the 1940s. Here Catholics and Hindus undertake rituals together across caste and religious boundaries, with locals opening their homes to pilgrims free of charge and all devotees, irrespective of background, sharing ceremonial meals. Elsewhere in Portugal, Turkey and Morocco, Catholics and Muslims similarly co-inhabit sacred spaces and customize devotional practices to St Antony (Albera and Fliche 2012, 94; Jansen and Kühl 2008, 295).

Against this background, an openness to Catholic-Hindu common worship and the mutual, syncretic participation in religious experiences is a diasporic, transnational legacy brought to East London by these migrants – part of a shared cultural and post-colonial understanding, common to Tamils from southern India and Sri Lanka, which is re-enacted (and transformed) in Forest Gate. As Jeyachandra puts it, drawing upon Hindu understandings of spiritual virtuosity and supplicatory gestures appropriate for the deities:

He is one of the Masters ... like a father. We can say 'Why am I here? Where am I going?' I have many questions inside of me. I put [them at] his feet. ... [in] everything he guide[s] and helps me.

Yet it is also important to recognize that it is not just recent arrivals, and those with more subjectively constructed spiritual lives, who find solace at the shrine. Reflecting on the draw to the parish each Tuesday night, Father John also observed:

I think its ... [a]lso [because] its been going for so long – 150 years – that's a [period of] time to really take root in the consciousness of the people here that there is a place you can go, a kind of place. ... you get people saying 'my mother used to, my father used to come here.' Not – there are certain strands of people – many people have moved out now. But you get the feeling that its been going for so long, its become part of the ... culture and the background of East London really.

The appeal of the shrine and its saint therefore vests in its historicity but also its contemporaneous flexibility – the Novena is a traditional practice, within an institutional setting, but is administered in a way that prioritizes openness, ecclesial hospitality, self-navigation and therefore allows for pluralism in practice. More recent Tamil arrivals like Jeyachandra may identify with the liturgically familiar modes of prayer such as vow rituals, practices (like knee walking) or supplication to a guru, a 'Master'. Simultaneously, the knot of elderly white parishioners present with their rosaries and missals connect into a pre-conciliar Catholic piety that has a longstanding presence and purchase in this part of London. Both forms of identification co-exist within this space, without necessarily interacting. For both communities, it is the rootedness of these prayers, and their efficacy, which give the Tuesday Novena an unmistakable attraction and ritual coherence. While this is therefore a devotional practice with a transformed, transnational expression and cross-

cultural application, it is simultaneously profoundly rooted in a local, parochial, historical and church-specific context. As Father Dennis expressed it, 'St Antony's has never lost it. They've always had that devotion here. Every single Tuesday, every single week for the last 120 years.'

Bodies in motion and everyday devotions

This case study of a dynamic extra-liturgical devotional practice raises a number of issues for consideration when contemplating where (and why) certain forms of religious practice - and churches - are flourishing (Goodhew 2015; Brierley 2014; Goodhew 2012). Within the Tuesday night Novena, distinctively Catholic practices and confessional boundaries (most especially surrounding communion reception) are acknowledged and enforced – but these understandings are also crossed, re-configured, and sometimes transgressed, as the church becomes a space for the expression of multi-valiant faith identities and the customization of a range of devotionals (Moyaert and Geldhof 2015). Polysemic prayer practices can also spill outside the ritual event and spatial confines of the church. For Jeyachandra, his Tuesday night homage to St Antony continues throughout the week at home – it is his custom to buy two candles, one for the church and the other for his own house shrine, where it burns for nine days (a *novena*) in front of his statute of St Antony. For this fervent devotee, there is a ritual and spatial continuity between his Tuesday night observances and his everyday, home-based prayer life. Materiality and notions of embodiment – articulated in the sensory, bodily practices of the faithful in their enacted encounter with a metaphorically embodied saint - are a key feature of these complex rituals and their appeal across differences of gender, class, ethnicity and generation

(Vásquez 2010; Walker Bynum 2011; Promey 2014; Jones and Matthews-Jones 2015). The presence of St Antony is always capable of invocation through the materiality of his shrine and statue – parents take their children up to the life-size figure and place a hand on his foot or cloak and then touch the head of their child. Others pray and rub the foot of the statue (or generate a ‘contact relic’ through the encounter of saint and object), and the result of this constant tactile encounter is a wearing away of the paint on the saint’s foot (despite the statue’s repainting and restoration just a couple of years ago). Devotion leaves its mark or impression on the saint, as he too impacts, bodily, on the lives of his clients (Harris 2013). In the procession of the congregation to the altar to kiss the first-class relic (contained in a glass panel within a wooden cross), there is another form of physical encounter – but this time with the historic body of the saint, thereby creating a connection across time and space (Harris 2013, 249). It is this element of the Novena that makes the most striking impression on Father John:

The young, the old ... big Travellers – and they kiss it like it’s a diamond. They go down [to kneel to kiss the relic] like it’s the rarest diamond. So it’s very touching and very beautiful to see that, their devotion.

The incarnational logic enacted through these practices is heightened by its coupling with another ritual action within the Novena – the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament on the altar, in which Christ’s incarnation is remembered and re-enacted through the doctrine of the real presence. There is a paradox of presence and absence, materiality and metaphor at the heart of these practices, which Father John and I spoke about in our conversation about his parishioners:

They’re a very concrete people and they’re not much [into] abstraction. Very few of them are people who sit back and reflect, who have time to even reflect on their lives. ... So whether it

be kneeling, whether it be the sign of the cross, its physical movement that sets your soul in movement. So 'smells and bells' ... the reaching out, the touching, the taste, the vision, the hearing, its all very much, for them, through their body, through the visible signs the soul is reaching out as well. ... there is a physical touch there that helps to incarnate their prayers.

As we have seen from the written prayers of St Antony's clients – chiefly as materialized on slips of paper and presented at his feet – this is also an intensely immediate, pragmatic and everyday devotional practice. Requests for help and gratitude for blessings received all relate to profoundly prosaic, personal and often familial issues. There is a commonality and consensus across gender and generation, religion and race of a shared vulnerability and the need for divine understanding and assistance. The vast majority of prayers are articulated within a relational framework – they ultimately pertain to family difficulties, be they marital formation or crisis; economic insecurity or the ill health of a loved one. Saint Antony is incorporated into this relational, familial framework as a 'father' (in Jeyachandra's words) or an attentive brother amongst a company of sibling saints (e.g. St Francis – see Heimann 2001, 278) whose statues are also found around the church – much like a Hindu temple – and who are also solicited for help on Tuesday evenings. There is a heavenly and profoundly earthy cosmopolitanism manifest through the spatiality of the church interior, and for many a connection to devotions encountered elsewhere in the worldwide Catholic communion. As Father Dennis explained:

Oh yes, you see you go down and there's a statue [of Padre Pio]. [And Saint Cyprian Michael Iwene] Tansi [who] is the Nigerian Cistercian monk who was in Leicester. ... So we've got black saints out there, all kinds of saints. So they're around the church ... And St Isidore, he was a great farmer in Dominica, and he loved the land and so they have mass in his honour every year, Bank Holiday Monday. They come here and they sing all the old Latin chants

because the French priests taught them that, and they have a Latin mass with a lot of Latin, because they've always done Latin in the past. ... It's part of their land, when you think of all the things associated with the land. They pray to St Isidore for good weather for the harvest. So there's that enriching of ... [our collective parish life].

Forms of Catholic prayer and worship from around the globe as legacies of missionary religion and reverse migration can be found in this one East London parish, as indeed many similar parishes across Britain and elsewhere.

These insights have lead recent ecclesialogists, reacting to the 'age of migration' (Miller 2009) to reconceptualise the church as 'inherently "mobile" or "shifting": the Body of Christ is not a static institution but rather a moving body – alive and changing, vulnerable and strong, always dying and growing' (Snyder 2016, 8-9). As a parish church that exemplifies a model of church as 'pilgrim', it is perhaps unsurprising that the Traveller community of London has found in St Antony and his shrine church a patron saint that serves their needs. Born in the 1970s in Kerry, Ann Marie functions as an informal community leader for London's Travellers, often speaking to London's Mayor about Traveller issues and, on her own account, encouraging many to find in the saint 'something to get you through'. Her own unwavering conviction in the 'power' of the saint – a refrain that recurrently punctuates her interview and echoes the set Novena formulas – commenced in 2006, despite her having been settled in Plaistow for over thirty years. As she described it:

And I remember my [daughter], my baby, she's 13 now, she had serious hearing difficulties and she never spoke, her speech was [delayed]. I first went to St Antony's church with a cousin and I prayed and prayed and I swore I'd never go back to my husband, because my husband gave me a hard life. And I asked him to give back my child's hearing and speech. I know people who say that's a big [request] or whatever but to me, you know, I wanted her to speak. So I prayed and prayed and prayed and said I'd never go back to my husband. She was four years of age and she started to talk to me. Well I took her back to the hearing people

in West Ham, in Stratford and they asked me 'What happened?' And I said 'What do you mean, "what happened"?' Cause they said she don't need to go to hospital because her hearing was that perfect. Before that they were sending me to Great Ormond Street. Before that they were going to make - ... so there was my miracle.

Building upon this important and intensely significant personal intervention, for Ann Marie St Antony is a saint that gives and does not 'take back' (unlike St Jude or St Thérèse of Lisieux, in her estimation). Within this informal and lay adjudicated supplicatory system, his support is constant, unconditional yet not uncritical. As she explained:

And if he don't give you what you ask, it's not meant for you. And I think they [the Traveller community] understand that as well. If you pray and pray and don't get nothing, you [could] turn away from your religion. But with St Antony, if it's not what you request, there's always something better. You know what I mean? He's saved a lot of people. He's saved a lot of marriages.

Struggling to raise three teenage daughters, caring for a seven month old granddaughter, and grieving from recently taking her brother's body home to Ireland, unable to save him from suicide through alcoholism and drug dependency, she concluded 'it's the faith that gets you through, the power of faith, trust enough in God.' (Garnett and Harris 2013a).

Ann Marie is not alone in this loyalty and reliance upon St Antony, although as she acknowledges '[for Travellers] all the saints are big', especially St Michael, Our Lady's Shrine at Walsingham, and devotion to Saint Padre Pio centred upon Brentwood Cathedral. Ann Marie's house is itself adorned with an untraditional image of the Holy Family in the hallway and large statues of Our Lady of Fatima and St Joseph with the Christ Child flanking the lounge room fireplace. In this practice, something of the tradition of household shrines amongst the 'religion of the street Irish' in 1840s London

that the journalist and social investigator Henry Mayhew observed, continues (Mayhew 2009,108; Garnett and Harris 2011). The provision of more spacious 1960s council housing has also provided outdoor spaces for religious expression, and within Ann Marie's back garden there is a homemade grotto shrine in which Our Lady of Fatima is flanked by St Philomena, St Michael and the Infant of Prague (with a fifty pence underneath its base, as a safeguard against 'ever going hungry') (figure 4). Her kitchen, the symbolic heart and hearth of the house, once provided a home for a centrally placed statue of St Antony, but it was hurled (and therefore smashed) during a domestic encounter with the police, and is awaiting (for some time now) replacement. Nevertheless, there is a coloured but faded circular sticker of the saint carrying the Child Jesus displayed on the street-facing front window. Amongst a host of saints, Ann Marie believes that St Antony retains a primary place for members of her community, and that their numbers are primarily responsible for swelling the Tuesday night Novena and sustaining, through their meagre but regular contributions, the church coffers:

Cause its just St Antony's for the lost and found. And people don't understand, because you can lose anything, you can lose your mind you know? It's not about materialism its about our faith ... They all believe it, they all pray for good husbands. The youth would pray for good husbands, or wives. The older [ones] to look after their families, or those in prison, or sick. St Antony's for our faith. ...

As a transnational testament to the power of this resource and its reach, Ann Marie cites the case of one Irish woman who would fly over to Forest Gate to do the nine consecutive Tuesdays, as 'that was how powerful St Antony was for her'. But St Antony's resonance and influence within this community is not confined to East London either. On a trip to Medjugorje some years ago, Ann Marie recalls that her Marian pilgrimage did not disrupt her Tuesday routine

and she sought out a Novena to the saint within the Bosnia-Herzegovinan town. She was astonished to be joined that evening by a large group of Travellers previously unknown to her, who similarly 'love St Antony so much that they gave up Medjugorje for a couple of hours [in dedication]'. Whether bringing together diasporic groups of Irish on pilgrimage in Europe or, more miraculously in her estimation, overcoming the racism and stigmata associated with the Traveller community in Britain (McCann, Ó Síocháin and Ruane 1994; Ó Haodha 2006; MacWeeney 2007, Taylor 2014) and 'making bridges' to interact with the 'settled' (but themselves also migratory) community of Catholics in East London, Ann Marie is unshakably convinced that 'there is great power, great healing in St Antony's prayers.'

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an ethnographic case study of traditional and transnational Catholicism in motion – the transformation of a longstanding extra-liturgical, and the customization of a popular devotional within a particularized setting amongst a distinctive constituency. As a powerful example of the ways in which migration, mobility and transnational forces are changing the Catholic church, it sheds light on the creative intersections of ethnicity, religious identity and subjectivity within a ritual practice that permits 'repeated crossing and inhabiting [of] boundaries between immigrant and non-immigrant, tradition and change, local and global, poor and rich, denomination and faith, unity and polycentricity, and the mundane and the transcendent' (Snyder 2016, 12). As this discussion has shown, those that 'dig St Antony' within this East London parish are many and varied, and while the inter-religious encounters within this church setting on one hand mirror the 'super-diversity' of this part of London (Vertovec 2007), for the Catholics, Hindus and

(occasional) Muslims gathered in prayer here, there is also the possibility of enhanced sociability and a recognition of shared vulnerability and reliance. St Antony's Novena in Forest Gate, as a devotional form common throughout the Catholic world, in *this* setting offers a vibrant, dynamic and surprisingly inclusive celebration of hope and trust. Throughout my observations of the ritual over a two-year period, and as reflected upon by the participants with whom I have spoken, there was never any discussion of sectarianism or ethnic tension surrounding the multi-ethnic and inter-religious constituencies at the Novena. As the Virgin Mary and other holy men and women function for some Catholics elsewhere, in this corner of London St Antony provides an accessible, reliable and powerful resource for the often powerless and sometimes desperate (Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012). As a migrant himself, and one who voluntarily embraced poverty, simplicity and the service of the poor, St Antony's life history resonates with his present-day cliental and has the capacity to transgress differences of ethnicity, caste, class and religion – facilitating practical and everyday inter-religious encounters through shared practices that integrate often marginalised and sometimes stigmatised Catholic (ethnic) minorities into the wider body of the church. As a bridge builder and a miracle worker, St Antony continues to be revered, though through a profoundly twenty-first century register, as the patron saint of the 'lost and found'.

Illustrations



Figure 1: Exterior of Pugin's church, Forest Gate c.1931. Permission of OAFM

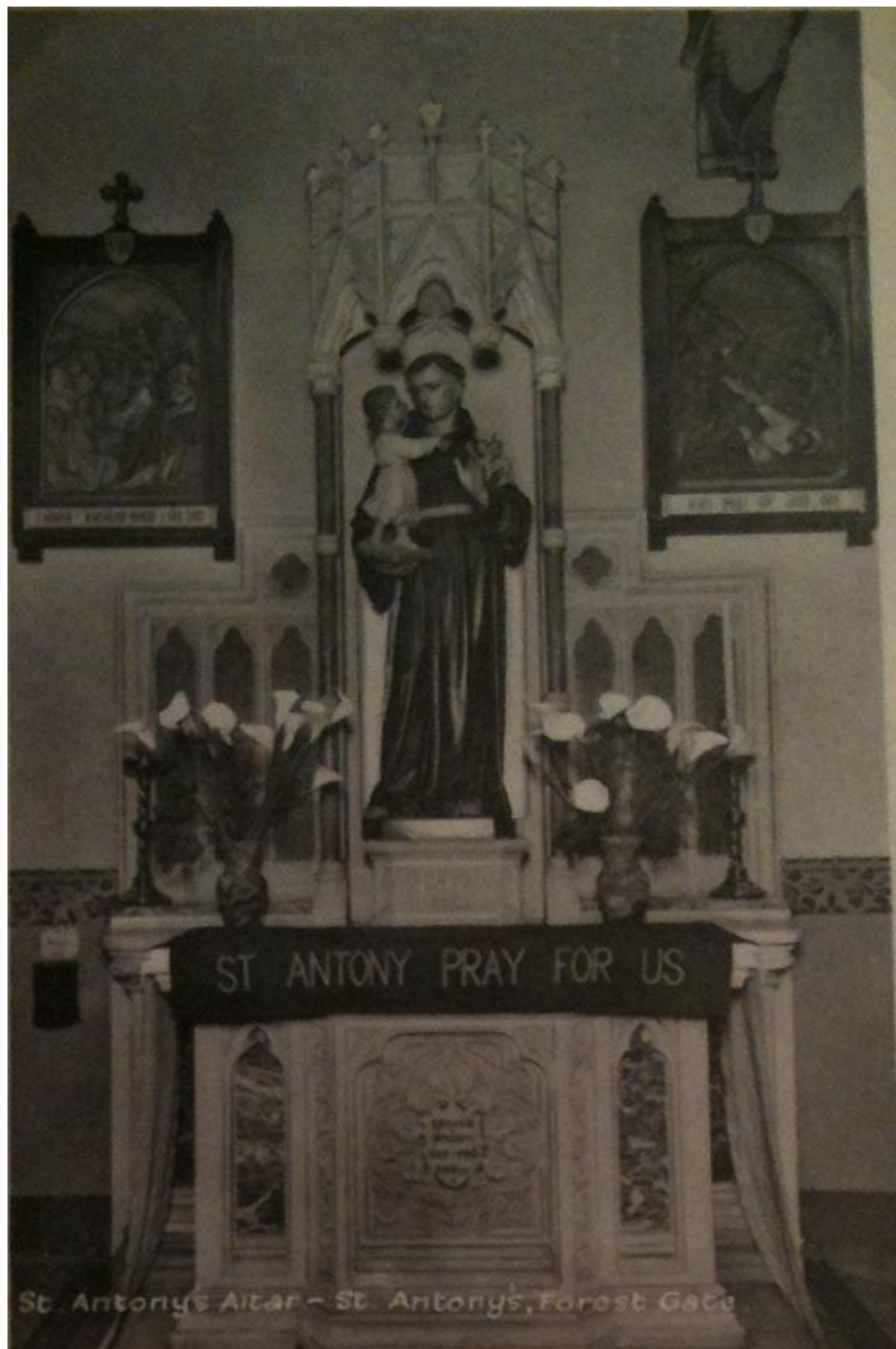


Figure 2: Statue of St Antony, Forest Gate c.1931. Permission of OAFM



Figure 3: Statue of St Antony in Uvari, Tamil Nadu, February festivities, 2012. Photo courtesy and with permission of Sujith Wilson Fernando.



Figure 4: Ann Marie's outdoor shrine to Our Lady and the saints. Photo: Alana Harris.

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NOTES

¹ Jeyachandra Jacuma (b.1978), Interview, 15 April 2014, transcript #114.

² Ethnographic material within this chapter is based on fieldwork undertaken over various Tuesday evenings throughout 2009, 2012, and Tuesday evenings in February and March 2014. All material gathered and interviews conducted have passed through ethics clearance, via the University of Oxford Central Research Ethics Committee, CUREC1A/14-201 and will be available shortly within the Bishopsgate Institute, East London EC2M 4QH.

³ *Bulletin*, No 27, 31 May 1964, 1 (Archives of the Franciscans Minor (AOFM), Box 17).

⁴ *Account of Receipts and Payments* (1963) (AOFM, Box 41).

⁵ Rev John Moloney (b.1969), Interview, 17 March 2014, transcript #113.

⁶ Rev Denis Hall (b.1941), Interview, 17 July 2009, transcript #92 & 93.

⁷ Ann Marie (b. 1970s), Interview, 18 December 2015, transcript #114.

⁸ Handwritten petition, 25 March 2014, #11. My thanks to Sivashanke Sivashanmugam for invaluable translation assistance.

⁹ Handwritten petition, 25 March 2014, #14.

¹⁰ Handwritten petition, 25 March 2014, #26.

¹¹ Handwritten petition, 25 March 2014, #34.

¹² Ann Marie (b. 1970s), Interview, 18 December 2015, transcript #114.